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COOPERATION IN THE FIELD OF HUMAN SETTLEMENTS

(Commission decision J (50))

Report by the Executive Secretary

1. This report has been prepared pursuant to paragraph 3 of decision J (50) related to ECE activities in the field of human settlements and in particular to preparations for the Habitat II Conference.

2. The Committee on Human Settlements included the preparations for the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements as a separate element of its programme of work (10.1.3).

3. The Government of Hungary in cooperation with ECE and the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) organized the fourth Meeting of Ministers Responsible for Human Settlements in Countries in Transition, in Budapest (Hungary) on 13-14 June 1995. The Meeting adopted a declaration which stated that the activities of ECE were very helpful in managing those deep changes which had occurred over the past few years in the countries in transition. The Meeting considered it very important that countries of the ECE region be represented at the highest possible level at the Habitat II Conference in Istanbul and ECE was invited to prepare a plan for regional activities as a follow-up to the Conference.

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4. The task force on the preparations for the Habitat II Conference established by the Committee on Human Settlements organized two workshops. The first (Istanbul, March 1995), organized in cooperation with the Housing Development Administration of Turkey, stressed that within the activities of the Committee on Human Settlements, it was most appropriate to address the problems related to the transition process and economic aspects of sustainability of human settlements and cities of the region, with particular emphasis on instruments and indicators to evaluate and guide the human settlements development process. Participants in the second workshop (Geneva, 7-8 December 1995) reported on national preparations for the Conference and made specific comments for the improvement of the second draft of the Habitat Agenda. The workshop pointed out that many provisions of the draft Habitat Agenda had a special relevance to the present work of the Committee on Human Settlements and that the UN regional commissions were well placed to monitor and support human settlements development. It was observed that the prevailing decision making process tended to deal separately with environment, economic and social aspects of human settlements. This affected the concerted actions of all groups, including government, industry, business and individuals. The workshop further concluded that in defining a future programme of work of the Committee, priority should be given only to those areas where the ECE had a comparative advantage over other intergovernmental organizations in coordinating its activities with other institutions, NGOs and the private sector.

5. The ECE Regional Preparatory Meeting for the Habitat II Conference, held in September 1994, highlighted the cross-sectoral nature of human settlements. Bearing in mind the cross-sectoral nature of the document "Towards sustainable human settlements development in the ECE region", the Interdivisional Coordination Group of the ECE secretariat revised it for submission to the Conference. This document indicates that human settlements development is a major category around which various synergies are revolving, such as environmental concerns, transport, energy, information system (including statistics), investments, etc. The results of activities in all these areas in the final analysis can only be measured against changes in the quality of life in human settlements. For that reason, it is of paramount importance to monitor human settlements development trends and implement related policies and strategies.

6. In response to this awareness, the ECE secretariat will prepare a special chapter on human settlement issues to be included in the Economic Survey of Europe in 1995-1996. Economic review of human settlements development in terms of investment, urban economy, construction industry, and housing affordability could be a item of future issues of the Survey.

7. The Guidelines for Sustainable Human Settlements Planning and Management have been approved by the Committee on Human Settlements for publication and submission to the Habitat II Conference. They are primarily aimed at decision makers at the national level and can assist member countries in reviewing and adapting policies, legislation and national regulations to achieve a built environment that is conducive to the well-being of the people. A task force will continue work on practical adaptation of the Guidelines in ECE countries, in particular on integration of national environmental objectives in urban planning, administration and management.

8. Land Administration Guidelines were prepared and approved for publication by the Committee on Human Settlements in September 1995. They will also be a part of the substantive contribution of the Committee to the Habitat II Conference. The issue of transferring land and real property to private persons, firms or semi-public institutions is an important part of the transition process. Structural changes in ownership have a crucial impact on private initiative and on the overall economic and social conditions in the countries concerned. The strategies support administrative, institutional, technical and managerial measures and instruments for reforming/establishing land registration systems and cadastre. A Meeting of experts on cadastre and land registration (26-27 February 1996) will work on practical aspects of implementation of the Guidelines.

9. The issue of renewal of human settlements in the ECE region has today taken on new significance. A sizeable part of the housing stock, particularly in central and eastern Europe, is in need of modernization and repair. The Committee on Human Settlements has prepared Strategies to Implement Urban Renewal and Housing Modernization Policies which will be part of the Committee's contribution to the Habitat II Conference. The task force will carry out work on case-studies in this field aimed at identifying practical examples of implementation of renewal and modernization policies in ECE countries, as well as related methods and instruments.

10. The Committee is engaged in preparing country profiles on the housing sector in Bulgaria and Poland with a view to supporting further the reforms of countries in transition in this sector. The importance of this issue is the multiplier effect that the housing sector has on the general economic development and recovery. The Committee also agreed to carry out a study on housing finance dynamics to improve performance of the housing sector which will focus on the challenges to be met in developing effective housing finance systems in transition countries. It will describe how the reform process of housing and housing finance has developed, what bottlenecks exist and where improvements and policy actions are most needed.

11. A task force set up by the Committee on Human Settlements in September 1995 will carry out a study on major trends based on the national reports for the Habitat II Conference which will help to understand better the development of human settlements and the mechanisms behind it. The outcome of the study will be a contribution to the Eighth Research Conference on Urban and Regional Research tentatively scheduled for 1998 in Spain.

12. At its fifty-sixth session the Committee on Human Settlements adopted a decision on the Meeting of Experts on Human Settlements Problems in Southern Europe. It confirmed the necessity to continue to promote the integration of policies based on sustainable development into planning, decision-making and economic activities and, in particular, to continue to convene the Meeting of Experts on Human Settlements Problems in Southern Europe, with a view to increasing cooperation among southern European countries. The Committee also agreed that the synthesis report of the Meeting of Experts' past activities, which also includes guidance for further work, be submitted together with its other substantial contributions to the Habitat II Conference.

13. The secretariat resources in the human settlements section were strengthened. A professional (P-5) was designated as a leader of the team on the human settlements issues and the section now consists of three professionals.